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Non-native student teachers' feelings of foreign language anxiety

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Abstract

This study investigates the feelings of foreign language anxiety of student teachers studying in a teacher education program in North Cyprus. The Turkish version of Horwitz's (1986) Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale and a set of open-ended questions were administered. The results indicate that different levels of anxiety were measured and also various anxious responses to open-ended questions obtained. In the light of these findings, there is a need to support future language teachers to eliminate, or at the very least to cope with, their foreign language anxiety prior to the start of their teaching career.

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1. Introduction

Research has been conducted on foreign language (FL) anxiety for many years now. Early research yielded inconsistent results in determining the relationship between FL anxiety and achievement in the target language. Some studies found negative relationships between anxiety and achievement, others found positive relationships, while others found no relationship at all. In his review of studies on FL anxiety, Scovel (1978) determined that the inconsistency of research was due to the fact that researchers did not specify the type of anxiety they were measuring, and he concluded that researchers needed specify what type of anxiety they were measuring in the future.

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope's (1986) groundbreaking study specified FL anxiety as a situation-specific anxiety unique to the FL classroom. They proposed that FL anxiety was made up of three components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. They also developed an instrument, the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), to measure FL anxiety. Using the FLCAS as a measure, they found a negative correlation between the level of FL anxiety and achievement in the target language

Since the Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) study, a majority of studies have followed similar procedures in studying the relationship between FL anxiety and achievement in the target language. The FLCAS has been the most

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widely-used instrument for measuring FL anxiety, although other measures have been used. Final grades, teacher ratings, and student self-ratings have generally been used as the measure of achievement in the target language.

Most research has proven that there is a negative correlation between FL anxiety and achievement in the target language in a large number of contexts and situations (see Horwitz, 1986; Horwitz, 1996; Kunt, 1997; Yan, 1998; Sellers, 2000; Kitano, 2001; Yan and Wang, 2001). Furthermore, a number of studies have examined FL anxiety in relation to specific language skills, such as reading, listening, writing, and speaking (see Saito and Samimy, 1996; Cheng, 1998; Cheng, Horwitz, and Schallert, 1999; Horwitz and Garza, 1999; Sellers, 2000; Argaman and Abu-Rabia, 2002; Cheng, 2002; Elkhafaifi, 2005). These studies have used skill-specific instruments to measure FL anxiety.

The Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) study had concluded that speaking was arguably the skill most affected by FL anxiety. Saito, Horwitz, and Garza (1999) found a negative correlation between levels of FL reading anxiety and achievement. Elkhafaifi (2005) found a negative relationship between levels of FL listening anxiety and achievement in Arabic. Cheng (2002) found the same negative relationship for FL writing. All of these studies provide evidence for the existence of skill-specific FL anxiety.

Research has also examined how the negative correlations between FL anxiety and achievement are related to a number of variables, such as age, years of study, gender, prior experience of living in or visiting the target culture, academic achievement, prior experience of learning FLs, self-perceived FL proficiency, self-perceived scholastic competence, perceived self-worth, and perfectionism, among other variables. Perhaps one of the most interesting findings of this research is that learners at advanced levels and / or who have experience of living in or visiting the target culture are more susceptible of FL anxiety. Kitano (2001), Gregerson and Horwitz (2002), and Onwuegbuzie, Bailey, and Daley (1999) provided evidence for these relationships. Kitano (2001) found a relationship between gender and the anxiety levels of male students became higher as those students perceived themselves as less competent. In short, it has been documented that the relationship between FL anxiety and achievement can be affected by a number of learner, environmental, and social factors.

The concept of FL anxiety resulting in poor FL learning has been opposed mainly by Sparks and Ganschow (1991). They propose that poor FL learning is a result of native language learning disabilities and FL anxiety may be a symptom but not a cause of poor FL learning.

Generally however, the research that has been conducted focuses on the foreign language learning anxiety experienced by students. It is sometimes forgotten that non-native foreign language teachers are also foreign language learners. Although they may be advanced users of the target language, it is safe to say that the language learning process is never complete (Horwitz, 1996). Thus, it is feasible that non-native foreign language teachers may experience a sense of anxiety from time to time. Very little research has been conducted on teachers' foreign language anxiety (Horwitz, 1996), even though it has the potential to negatively influence foreign language teaching through the teacher's use of the target language, pedagogical choices, and overall well-being. As the number of non-native foreign language teachers increases by the year worldwide (Borg, 2006), and when the potential effects of foreign language teaching anxiety are considered, it is clear that more research is desperately needed in this area. This study aims to shed more light on foreign language anxiety experienced by prospective foreign language teachers through conducting empirical research on this phenomenon.

2. Method

This paper is part of a larger study with a limited scope based on descriptive statistics and a qualitative analysis of data of the student teacher responses to the open-ended questions of the FLCAS. The aims of this study were: (1) to investigate the levels of foreign language anxiety experienced by non-native foreign language student teachers, and (2) to explore how foreign language anxiety affects the feelings of students while using the target language in and out of class.

2.1 Participants

The participants of the study were non-native foreign language student teachers studying in a four-year teacher education program in North Cyprus. The participants were enrolled in different courses of the teacher education program.

2.2 Instruments

The Turkish version of Horwitz's (1986) FLCAS was administered initially to the participants. The FLCAS consists of 33 items. A five-point Likert Scale, ranging from 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree', is used by the participants when responding to the items. The items elicit the participants' self-reports of their anxiety in the foreign language classroom. The FLCAS was followed up with a number of open-ended questions further eliciting students' self-reports of foreign language anxiety.

2.3 Data collection and analysis

Prior to the collection of the data, the student teachers were briefed on the study and their consent was obtained. The FLCAS was then distributed and data collected in the student teachers' classrooms after obtaining permission from the teacher education program in North Cyprus. Descriptive analyses were performed on the student teachers' responses to the FLCAS. Quantitative analysis of the data was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for Window Release 16.0. The qualitative analysis of the data was conducted for the responses to the open-ended questions for FLCAS, and they were categorized and the results were summarized.

3. Findings and Discussion

The FLCAS yields a composite score ranging from 33 (not anxious at all), which means the subject strongly disagrees with all items, to 165 (extremely anxious), where the subject strongly agrees with all items. In this study, the FLCAS results indicated that different levels of foreign language anxiety were measured among the student teachers with the minimum anxiety score measured being 40 and the maximum score being 153.

In response to the open-ended item "Is there anything else that makes you feel nervous when you are in class?", a variety of responses were obtained. One of the interesting indications of the study was that during the individual responses, the student teachers reported that they felt nervous and uncomfortable due to the attitudes of native speakers in the classroom. They also complained that the native speakers in the classroom tended to monopolize class time, greatly restricting their opportunities to use the target language in the classroom. Some of the written responses were:

"I do not like it when the native English speakers criticize my English."

"Native English speakers monopolize the class time and we do not have enough opportunity to practice English in the class."

"My native speaker friends laugh at our mistakes. It upsets me when the native speakers make fun of us."

Another point that was repeatedly reported was the lack of courses aimed at developing speaking skills in the teacher education program. The program did not offer any courses aimed at developing the speaking skills of the student teachers after the first year. A considerable number of student teachers reported that they were concerned about the amount of speaking practice in the program and were worried this would negatively affect their speaking ability in the long run. It should be noted that these were also their beliefs about language learning and may contribute more to the student teachers' tension and frustration. According to Horwitz, et al. (1986), certain beliefs about language learning may create anxiety and prevent the development of second language fluency and performance. Some of the responses were:

"I do not believe that I will gain fluency in English through the education I'm getting now or by studying at home."

"We need communication courses for every academic year in order to improve our speaking ability."

"I believe that I have the knowledge of the language but I lack the practice."

The participants' responses to the open-ended items were also indicative of foreign language anxiety. Other responses that were recorded indicated that student teachers had the tendency to overreact to the stresses of communicating in the target language and set unrealistic standards to meet for their performance in the target language. For instance:

“When I get nervous I forget everything while speaking”
 “I get nervous when I don’t understand the subject my instructor talks about”
 “I feel that it makes me nervous when I misuse a word or make a mistake”
 “I’m afraid of making mistakes while speaking”

Such perfectionist tendencies are in-line with previous research on foreign language anxiety. Gregerson and Horwitz (2002) noted in their study of foreign language student-teachers that anxious participants were noted to be very concerned about the errors they made and that the way learners react to limitations in the target language can be anxiety provoking with highly anxious learners generally tending to overreact to their limitations. Horwitz (1996) had also stressed that foreign language teachers were susceptible candidates for foreign language anxiety since they were likely to set unrealistically high standards of performance for themselves.

Additionally, the student teachers in the present study seemed quite nervous regarding the application of grammar rules during their speaking, stating:

“It makes me nervous when I forget the grammar rules and the meaning of the words”
 “It makes me nervous when I can’t apply the grammar rules while speaking.”

These responses are similar to the clinical experience with foreign language university students in Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope’s (1986) study, which stated that anxious students have difficulty concentrating and may become forgetful. Horwitz et.al (1986) pointed out that students with foreign language anxiety commonly report to counselors that they “know” a certain grammar point but “forget” it during an oral exercise when numerous grammar points must be recalled and coordinated simultaneously.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Both quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that the non-native student teachers who participated in this study experience foreign language anxiety at various levels that may negatively influence themselves and their teaching performance. In light of these findings, instructors should recognize student teachers’ feelings of foreign language anxiety instead of simply evaluating them.

The points about the limited number of speaking courses and the behavior of native speakers seem to be unique to this context. This may require the attention of the instructors and the program developers; however, these points may not be the only basis of speaking anxiety for the prospective English language teachers in the present study. According to numerous research studies, speaking in the target language seems to be the most anxiety provoking characteristic of foreign language learning. As language educators, we must support student teachers to communicate in the target language as much as possible.

It should be highlighted that the presence of student teachers in language education programs who are native speakers is a fortunate situation and instructors should keep in mind the mutual educational benefits for both natives and non-natives while they plan that can improve all the student teachers’ communication skills. In addition, language teachers at all levels of experience should be ready to listen to their colleagues’ apprehension about the target language use in a supportive and nonjudgmental manner (Horwitz, 1996).

Future language teachers’ experiences of foreign language anxiety should be acknowledged. They need to be supported to overcome or at the very least to cope with their anxiety prior to the start of their teaching career.

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